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ABSTRACT

At-risk students are defined as those who are in danger of not graduating from school. These potential dropouts can be characterized by a variety of factors that lead to educational underachievement. In this study, the outcome explored is "outcast," a combination of student behavioral factors that captures student alienation from school in the larger context of being "at-risk." The focus is on social and school structures that impair students' abilities to learn and grow. Data are from the base year of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, a study of the educational status of about 25,000 eighth graders. A multivariate regression analysis used the outcast factor as the dependent or outcome variable with these independent variables introduced to determine their effects on "outcast": Hispanic or African American status, socioeconomic status, gender, family structure (single parent or no parent), middle school grade point average, parent-child communication, family stress, and student perceptions of control or luck ("nocontrol"). The multivariate regression analysis demonstrated that the observed stratification between ethnic and gender groups was mediated for Hispanics with the inclusion of the "nocontrol" reports, suggesting at least some degree of internalization of one's own outcast characteristics. The African American group continued to be significant in outcast status despite the inclusion of this factor. The research also demonstrated that school suspensions are more likely to be imposed on African American males in particular. In the final analysis, it seems that until we revise schooling to treat people as individuals in context and not as pawns or agents of a system, disparate treatment will continue and effective educational reform may be beyond our grasp. Four appendixes present charts from the regression analyses. (Contains 10 tables and 16 references.) (SLD)

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"At-Risk": A Measure of School Failure in American Education

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One of the major concerns in education today is the increased numbers of those students who are labeled "at-risk." At-risk students are, by a broad definition, those students who are in danger of not graduating from school. These potential dropouts tend to be characterized by a variety of factors such as poor attendance in school, behavioral conflicts with formal school processes which provoke suspensions, low standardized test scores, and below grade level performance. These factors can, and do, lead to educational underachievement (LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991).

The outcome of this study is "outcast," a combination of student behavioral factors ranging from how often a student does not arrive prepared for school to occurences of suspensions and arrests. This "outcast" variable captures the behavioral aspects of student alienation from school referred to in the larger context of being defined as "at-risk." An outcast is defined as "a person who is rejected or cast out, as from home or society...a homeless wanderer"(Random House Dictionary). From a schooling perspective however, an outcast has a more insidious predictor. He or she is a casualty of a struggle for dominance where the rules of engagement are not quite clear to them most in need of redemption. Some students are casualties because like soldiers in war they confront unknown enemies and perils. Students become casualties when they are unprepared for the demands of an alien and sometimes hostile environment. Schools have become alien environments over time where the substance of learning has ceased to be relevant to the experiences of the student. Eventually these students loose trust, loose interest, feel defeated, may act out violently or passively submit, fail to survive and soon fall by the wayside.

This research paper focuses on those social and school structures which impair students' ability to learn and to grow. It articulates the African American and Hispanic students' experience those who are in fact in the "majority" in our inner city schools. This study focuses on the disparity of their educational experience which contributes to their sense of alienation and loss of relevancy. Finally, it tests the hypothesis implied by those who collect data on students' failure, that disparate home and family circumstances in some sense "explain" those differences observed in school failure between different student groups.

To address effectively the pervasive debilitating effects of being "at risk", it is necessary to define it in ecological terms. This problem is multifaceted and therefore it is essential that we see it from different points of view taking into account as many variables as possible. The following is a summary of the ongoing discourse around the idea of what it means to be "at-risk".

In a recent paper titled, "Who are the "At-risk" students of the 1990s?", Hixon and Tinzmann (1990) write that historically at-risk students are primarily those whose "appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures" do not correspond to those of the dominant white culture that schools were designed to serve and support. At-risk students appear to be primarily minorities who are poor and considered educationally and economically disadvantaged. While ongoing discussions about school failure among educators and policymakers have defined it from four different perspectives: Predictive, Descriptive, Unilateral and School Factors, the traditional view remains that students are solely responsible for their school performance without taking into account schooling processes. School failure consequently is characterized solely as a deficiency in the student and in his/her environment.

While these four perspectives describe "at-riskness" from distinctive points of view, they do not fully account for the phenomenon of student failure. To conduct an adequate analysis of this phenomenon, it is necessary perhaps to consider "at-risk" as a combination of all four perspectives taking into account the effects of their interaction. We need to explore how school structure effects the community and the school as processes change over time. This exploration will necessitate a focusing on pedagogical history and political beliefs to see how they drive school processes and its norms to act as catalysts for school failure for many students today.

Schools in our society have a very distinct and important responsibility to educate and to indoctrinate our youth in preparation for the challenges of the future. They provide our students with some rudimentary tools for survival and they introduce the protocols by which they will interact with one another in their ongoing struggles for individual identity and power. Our schools are essentially microcosms representative of the socioeconomic and infrastructure of our society. They produce and reproduce the characteristic patterns of behavior that appears to be dependent upon culture and socioeconomic status. This continuing process of social reproduction appears however to cause divisions in the educational structure (Eckert, 1989) contributing to the separateness of the intellectual experience for our students specifically affecting those in urban schools. Consequently, social reproduction over time has become a "templet" to guide students in their interaction with institutions to maintain order and social control. What was meant to guide the attitudes and styles of interaction among our students appears to have created an intolerance to difference.

This developed propensity for intolerance to students' differences or socio-cultural contexts is of particular concern to students who belong to ethnic minority groups. For example, according to data collected over the years by the Office of Student Data, Testing and Records for the Rochester City School District, a significant number of minority students are not participating successfully in the educational process (At Risk Report, 1992). It appears that a disproportionate amount of ethnic minority students are not meeting academic standards. Educators have attempted to identify causes of this discrepancy, and have attributed them to the effects of poverty, divorce, single or no parent households, substance abuse or dependence, violence and racism.

These debilitating social factors have long term effects which seem to impact student lives, resulting directly in limiting access to mainstream economic, educational and social opportunities.

To gain access to these mainstream opportunities for a better life in our society, it is contingent upon socioeconomic status. Without membership in certain communities or districts, a "quality" education is sometimes difficult to acquire. Many social activists see our system of education as an instructive tool which promotes social change in the process of schooling (Gupa & LeCompte) while neo Marxists view it as the implicit nature of the messages of conspiracy perpetuated by the upper echelon of our society. This they argue reinforces a socioeconomic stratification which enhances their domination. Social efficiency people on the other hand interpret the process of schooling as a way for our society to continue to democratize all of our citizens. Similarly, proponents of moral education in schooling feel that it is society's mission to establish a consolidated national character and to inculcate the standards of a public morality and uniform culture in preparation for the challenges of the twentieth century (Giroux & Purpel, 1983). Regardless of the individual philosophical perspective, educational structures and mechanisms appear to limit access to opportunity for many students. (Dannefer, 1987)

Functional ideology is therefore integral in the curriculum and in the bureaucracy of all public schools. This means that everything has its function and everyone is taught and is driven to serve a specific and utilitarian purpose in the established educational structure. Likewise, students are exposed to this modality and are expected to model these ideological attributes in order to graduate and to experience success in the world of work. Initiative and creativity while valued highly in the higher levels of society is discouraged among the poor. Individuality is functional as long as it serves to maintain our social institutions and our schools hegemonic in American society (Eckert, 1989). What is encouraged is one's total capitulation to authority. "Conflict, either intellectual or normative, is seen as a negative attribute in social life" (Giroux & Purpel, 1983).

Capitulation to authority is functional in our schools within the structure of our classrooms and is reinforced and legitimated by school processes. For example, rigid seating arrangements, an over emphasis on being quiet and attentive therefore non participatory, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate amount and culturally insensitive teaching materials and finally, suspensions all contribute to a sense of alienation and helplessness. It is this emphasis on obedience to school rules and docility in the classroom rather than in the development of critical thought which kill our students' ability and incentive to survive adversity and change. Administrative attempts to assuage the deteriorating situation in the schools by controlling students in "a factory like system...schoolroom..." (Zinn,1980, p.257) is failing miserably but succeeding in a sense by reinforcing a class and race system.

Another debilitating social phenomenon our students face in education today is called "Disjuncture"(LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991), which refers to the discrepancy between what students can reasonably expect as an educational outcome and what actually

happens at the end of years of schooling. This discrepancy leads to student feelings of alienation, confusion, powerlessness, anger and disappointment. Students eventually become "outcasts" as they interact in a system which is antiquated and ceases to be relevant to their changing needs for personal and professional growth. Students are becoming more and more disconnected from the realities of an evolving global society which demands more specialization and training. Nowhere is this cloud of confusion and sense of powerlessness more apparent than in our classrooms. They act out against a system which stratifies the educational experience, rendering learning as a routine of drudgery and servitude. Students and teachers alike are a part of a caste-like system which encourages mediocrity as a goal through bureaucratic processes of standardization and certification. Minorities are particularly vulnerable as they face insurmountable barriers which impede meaningful professional growth. They are "at-risk" because the system is not prepared to teach them in a manner which takes their perspectives and their unique circumstances into consideration.

Theoretical Framework

Pedagogy in most public schools today has remained essentially unchanged while the world outside has evolved. Given the complex realities inherent in a merging global society, many companies (for example) are forced to respond to immense changes in technology as well as consumer base, significantly altering management systems in their organizations. Similarly, educators need to reassess whether continuing business as usual is viable or desirable given these new demands. As a specific example, during the past few years, an increased focus on the ineffective educational standards for student advancement in Rochester inner city schools has prepared the way for a change in educational policy. The mandated change is that all students will now take Regents courses. However, this change in standardization is an attempt to raise the apparent value of what our students learn, but does not focus on the processes of how and why they learn. This change in policy is essentially an attempt to reform the system without taking into consideration the changes in the social context of schools over time.
In fact, our justifications for the apparent failure of our students and teachers to perform are a drill in self deception. The high rate of suspensions throughout the districts, the need for more peer mediations, a low parent involvement in our schools and, a high turnover rate among teachers are indicative of a more insidious problem. The consequences are that students as well as teachers experience feelings of dispossession and low self worth, act out their frustrations in class and at home, making it an environment conducive to failure and "burn out."

Method

Data for this research was taken from the base year of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, a general purpose study of the educational status and progress of about 25,000 eighth grade students in 1,035 American middle grade schools, sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (National Center for Educational Statistics,1990).

Measures

The primary predictors of this study are ethnic group membership; Middle School Grade Point Average; gender; family socio-economic status; "Family stress" - reports of family substance abuse and crime; "Parent-child communication" - reports of how often a parent and a child communicate regarding school matters; and "Nocontrol" - student feelings about luck and control in their lives. Two specific "minority" or ethnic groups were derived from the data: AfricaM and Hispanic. The principle analysis conducted was hierarchical regression.

Table 1
Variables in Regression Analysis

	Mean	Std Dev	Cases	Label
SES	.000	1.000	5048	Socio-economic Status Composite
BYSGPA	2.924	.764	4989	GPA in Middle School
HISPANIC	.131	.337	5045	Hispanic American
AFRICAM	.108	.311	5045	African American
FEMALE	.513	.500	5048	Gender
NOCONTRL	.000	1.000	5048	No Control
OUTCAST	.000	1.011	5048	
SINGPAR	.293	.455	4994	Single Parent Household
NOPARENT	.031	.172	4994	No Parents
PCCOMM	.004	.999	4791	Parent Child Communication
FSTRESS	.000	1.009	5048	Family Stress

Minimum Pairwise N of Cases = 4738
NOCONTROL: Composite created by Dr. Julia Smith

Analysis

Several analyses of variance were performed to determine if any significant differences exist among the different ethnic groups.

Table 2
(ONEWAY)

Variable OUTCAST
By RACE (1= Asian American, 2= Hispanic+African American +American Indian, 3= White)

		Grp 1	Grp 3	Grp 2
Mean	Group			
-.1224	Grp 1			
-.0388	Grp 3			
.1309	Grp 2	*	*	

*p< .05

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Table 3

OUTCAST
by HISPANIC and AFRICAM

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Main Effects	32.905	2	16.453	16.201	.000
HISPANIC	5.402	1	5.402	5.320	.021
AFRICAM	30.369	1	30.369	29.905	.000
Explained	32.905	2	16.453	16.201	.000
Residual	5120.182	5042	1.016		
Total	5153.087	5044	1.022		

5048 cases were processed.
3 cases (.1 pct) were missing.

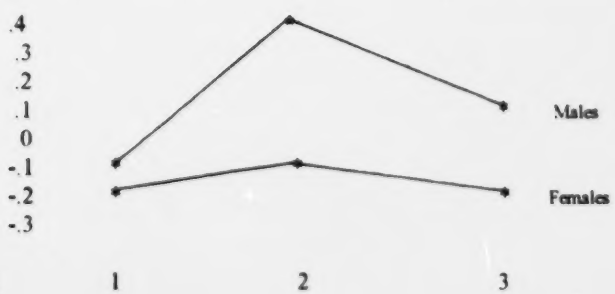
Table 4

OUTCAST
by FEMALE (Gender, where standard is female)
RACE (1= Asian American, 2= Hispanic+African American +American Indian, 3= White)

FEMALE	0	1	RACE	1	2	3
	0.1	-.01		-0.1	0.1	-0.0
	(2455)	(2590)		(265)	(1271)	(3509)

	RACE			
		1	2	3
FEMALE				
	0	-0.1	0.4	0.1
		(142)	(586)	(1727)
	1	-0.2	-0.1	-0.2
		(123)	(685)	(1782)

Table 5
(Graph of Table 4)



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The Analysis of Variance utilizing the "Outcast" factor and the categorical variable (Race) yielded an F ratio of 15.27 with a probability of P <.00001 which means that after taking race into consideration there exists a significant difference among the racial groups when considering this "outcast state" that would not occur by chance alone. The Oneway analysis also shows that group 1 (Asians) and group 3 (Whites) are significantly different from group 2 (AfricaM and Hispanic) at the 0.05 level. The Mean for Group 2 is +.13 and for groups 1 and 3 is -.12 and -.04 respectively. This demonstrates the existence of a disproportionate amount of students from group 2 experiencing higher levels of these "outcast" behavioral factors. Additionally, the Analysis of Variance, utilizing the Outcast factor as the outcome and gender and race as predictors, it demonstrates a significant interaction of these factors. Therefore, there exists significant variations among the racial groups.

Additionally, the data also shows that there exists a disproportionate variation between the genders among the three groups with group 2 having the largest disparity in gender representation in this outcast state. Specifically, there are a greater number of males than females represented in this outcast status among all three groups with the greatest disparity once again in group 2 (AfricaM and Hispanic).

Table 6
Regression Analysis

Variable	Unstandard Coefficient	Standard Coefficient
HISPANIC	.004	.001
AFRICAM	.10*	.03*
FEMALE	-.24***	-.12***
SES	-.04**	-.04**
BYSGPA	-.15**	-.12**
NOCONTRL	.04**	.04**
NOPARENT	.12	.02
SINGPAR	.02	.01
PCCOMM	-.06***	-.05***
FSTRESS	.11***	.11***

Sig. *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Research Subjects and Data

My first principle component analysis utilized the section **Student Behaviors** from the National Longitudinal Education Study of 1988 . The variables I chose to work with range from how often a student arrives prepared with educational materials such as pencils, books and homework done to variables regarding suspensions and arrests. Student responses to the majority of these survey questions range from a scale "never" to "over 15 times." The variables used for the analysis range from F2SBHVO1 to F2SBHVl2. The final outcome of this analysis was the creation of my **Outcast** factor. (see Table 7)

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The initial factor analysis and correlation matrix extracted three factors from these 12 distinct variables. The Varimax Rotation yielded five variables as representative of the principle component of my analysis. I then proceeded with a second factor analysis with these five variables: **F2SBHVO8 to F2SBHVl2** which yielded one combined factor. After this analysis, I then proceeded to conduct a Reliability Analysis on all five variables, which reported an alpha level of (.54).

Results and Discussion

This multivariate regression analysis utilized the Outcast factor as the dependent or outcome variable. The following independent variables were introduced to the analysis to establish the level of effect on the Outcast factor: Hispanic, AfricaM, SES, Female, Singpar, Noparent, BYSGPA, PCcomm, FStress and Nocontrol (see table 1).
The analysis shows that both ethnic groups Hispanic and AfricaM, when compared to whites, were higher on the outcast factor for the norm (whites). In the following step of the regression analysis, gender was then introduced which shows that women are (.28) standard deviation lower than men in this outcast status, a significant difference ($p<.00001$). When the S.E.S. composite was introduced, Hispanics were less than standard deviation for whites which means that the group is no longer significantly more outcast. However, AfricaM continued to be significant, $p<.0003$, still almost 20% of standard deviation above whites. In addition, the gender difference remained unchanged despite the introduction of the SES composite.

Introduction of the following variables: GPA, Nocontrol, Noparent, Singpar into the regression analysis, all generated negligible changes. The results still reflected a significant difference in the AfricaM group while making no real change in the other groups. At this point, I explored new measures in an attempt to help "explain away" this apparent disparity with the AfricaM group and the outcast factor. The following two factors were created and introduced into the regression analysis: PCcomm and Fstress (see Table 1)

PCcomm utilized the variables from the **Relationship with Parents** section of the survey. Three initial factors were found with the final factor analysis generating the final composite. (see appendix 1)

The first question I explored regarding this new combined factor PCcomm was to determine whether a significant difference exists among the Hispanic, AfricaM and white groups in their reported parent-child communication. I performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the results reflected a definite difference. The mean values for AfricaM and Hispanic were -.20 and -.19 respectively. This means that Hispanic and African American students have reported less communication with their parents regarding school matters as compared to the mean (white students).

The next combined factor I created was Fstress. This composite was taken from the variables FMLSTROl through FMLSTRl7: Types of Family Stress. The last factor

analysis utilizing some of these variables yielded one strong factor. (see appendix 2) I followed a similar procedure with this new factor as I had done with the PCcomm. I performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to help find any significant difference which may exist among the Hispanic, AfricaM and the mean group (white) in comparing it to the Fstress combined factor. The results did show a significant difference in the AfricaM group, P< .OOO1 which means that we would not observe this value by chance alone. On the other hand, for the Hispanic group, the average was not significantly different.

The next step in my regression analysis was to introduce these two new combined factors, PCcomm and Fstress into the regression analysis. Once PCcomm was introduced, the Hispanic group approached a T-value of .9890 while the AfricaM approached a T value of .0100 and Gender remained unchanged at P< .00001 with females representing .25 standard deviation than males after taking this parent-child communication factor into account.

Fstress factor also reflected a negligible change once introduced. The T-values for the AfricaM and the Hispanic groups were P< .0226 and P< .9123 respectively with no real change in Gender.

The next step required introducing some variables from the family stressors section of the survey yet not considered which may help to explain away this disproportion in values among the different groups. (see appendix 3) The introduction of these new variables resulted in the following values:

Table 8
Regression Analysis

Variable	Unstandard Coefficient	Standard Coefficient
Hispanic	-.01	-.003
AfricaM	.09	.027
Female	-.24**	-.119**
SES	-.04**	-.04**
BYSGPA	-.15**	-.11**
NOCONTROL	.04**	.04**
Oparent	.12	.02
Singpar	.01	.01
PCcomm	-.06**	-.06**
Fstress	-.02	-.02
Flmcrm	.19**	.16**

**p<.05

These resulting values are interesting as they now show that the AfricaM group after taking these new family stressors into account and comparing it with the outcome variable Outcast, there is no longer any significant difference.

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Significance

The results of the analyses of variance did show that those members of the AfricaM and the Hispanic groups did have a significantly higher incidence of overall "outcast" behaviors compared to whites. These differences were similar for male and female students, in which (for all three) males were more likely than female students to be high in "outcast" characteristics.(see Table 5)

The multivariate regression analysis demonstrated that the observed stratification between ethnic and gender groups was mediated for Hispanics with the inclusion of the combination of "nocontrol" reports (see appendix 4). This result suggests at least some degree of internalization of one's own outcast characteristics. In other words, it appears that Hispanic students are able to overcome to some extent the "outcast" effects with opportunity to self determine along school matters. Acquiring some level of autonomy by participating in some decision making process suggests that Hispanics are therefore able to deal more effectively with their outcast status. However, the students from AfricaM background did not adjust with the inclusion of this factor. The AfricaM group continued to be significant in outcast status despite the inclusion of this factor (Nocontrol) which may suggest that another variable or condition may exist which does account for this disparity.

This research also demonstrates that school suspensions are imposed more on certain groups than others. African American males in particular are more likely to experience suspensions and expulsions and as a consequence, they account for a greater amount of school failures.

It is critical to test hidden assumptions which continue to be framed explaining ethnic and gender differences in being placed "at-risk" in American educational systems. The prescribed corrective action taken to control students' "undesirable behaviors" appears, from this empirical analysis, to have a direct relationship with comparisons of an "Outcast" status among and within the various groups. Further, it is possible that suspensions serve as legitimization for the treatment of disempowered groups of people. For example, the fact that suspensions are far more prevalent among males than females supports the implication that, in a patriarchal system, it seems more necessary to control males than females in order to assure compliance with regulations and pliancy in a system with a propensity for inequalities. In the final analysis, it seems that, until we revise schooling to treat people as individuals in context and not as pawns or agents of a system, disparate treatment will continue and effective educational reform may be beyond our grasp.

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Table 7
Student Behaviors

F2SBHVO1: How oftn go to clss wout pencil ppr'
F2SBHVO2: How oftn go to clss wout books
F2SBHVO3: How oftn go to clss wout hmwk done
F2SBHVO4: How mny times late for school
F2SBHVO5: How mny times cut/skip classes
F2SBHVO6: How mny times miss school
F2SBHVO7: How mny times got in trouble in sch
F2SBHVO8: How mny times put on in-sch susp
F2SBHVO9: How mny times suspended from sch
F2SBHV1O: How mny times trnsfrrd disciplinary
F2SBHV11: How mny times arrested
F2SBHV12: How mny times spnt time injuv ctr.

Table 9: Means and Percents for Variables used in this Analysis.

Variable	Mean or Percent
Outcast	.000
Female	.513
AfricaM	.108
Hispanic	.131
SES	.000
Family Stress	.000
Parent Communication	-.004
No Control	.000

Table 10: Final Regression Analysis on Outcast Composite.

Impact on Outcast Characteristics

Predictors	Beta	t-value
Female	-.12	-8.48***
AfricaM	.03	+2.28*
Hispanic	-.002	-.11
SES	-.04	-2.68**
Family Stress	.11	+8.10***
Parent Communication	-.06	-3.70***
NoControl	.04	+2.67**

* p<.05 ** p <.01 *** p<.001

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Appendix 1
(PCcomm composite)

Variables	Label	Mean	Std. Dev.
BYSPARO1	How often discuss programs at schl W/P	1.239	.689
BYSPARO2	How often discuss schl activities W/P	1.486	.662
BYSPARO3	How often discuss things studied in clss	1.403	.686
BYSPARO4	How often discuss HS Program W/F	1.055	.752
BYSPARO5	How often discuss HS Program W/M	1.395	.678

Appendix 2
(Fmstress composite)

Variables	Label	Mean	Std. Dev.
FMLSTRI5	Last 3 yrs family member used drugs	.128	.334
FMLSTRI6	Last 3 yrs family member in drug rehab	.067	.250
FMLSTRI7	Last 3 yrs family member crime victim	.120	.326

Appendix 3
(Variables: Family Stressors)

FMLSTRO2: Last 3 yrs Parents got divorced
FMLSTRO8: Last 3 yrs one/bth parents died
FMLSTRO4: Last 3 yrs one/bth parents lost job
FMLSTR12: Last 3 yrs Family was on welfare

Appendix 4
(NoControl Composite)

Lable		Mean	Std.
BYSATD03	I feel good about myself.	3.3	.61
BYSATD04	I dont have enough control over my life.	1.9	.80
BYSATD09	Plans hardly work out, makes me unhappy.	2.0	.79
BYSATD11	I certainly feel useless at times.	2.5	.82
BYSATS15	Change and luck important in my life.	2.3	.91

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